

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 456 470

CS 510 609

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TITLE Meyrowitz, McLuhan, Medium Theory and Me: Why Medium Theory Needs To Be Taught alongside Techniques for New Communication Technologies.
PUB DATE 2001-08-00
NOTE 25p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (84th, Washington, DC, August 5-8, 2001).
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: <http://list.msu.edu/archives/aejmc.html>.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Communication (Thought Transfer); Higher Education; *Mass Media; Teaching Methods; Technological Advancement; *Theories

ABSTRACT

At the 2000 International Communication Association convention, a panel discussed nominees for a communications canon. Fully one-third of these were examples of medium theory, yet the only living author of the three medium theorists listed argues that this branch of thought is misunderstood and under-addressed (Meyrowitz, 1996). This paper includes a brief overview of medium theory and its key theorists and an analysis of a month-long focus on medium theory in a communications class at a midwestern college. The paper concludes with recommendations for teaching medium theory in the college classroom. (Contains 4 notes and 20 references. An appendix contains a medium theory reading list.) (Author/RS)

MEYROWITZ, MCLUHAN, MEDIUM THEORY AND ME:
Why medium theory needs to be taught alongside techniques for new
communication technologies

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ABSTRACT

At the 2000 ICA convention, a panel discussed nominees for a communications canon. Fully one-third of these were examples of medium theory, yet the only living author of the three medium theorists listed argues that this branch of thought is misunderstood and under-addressed (1996). This paper includes a brief overview of medium theory and its key theorists and an analysis of a month-long focus on medium theory in a communications class at a midwestern college. The paper concludes incorporates survey results into recommendations for teaching medium theory in the college classroom.

**MEYROWITZ, MCLUHAN, MEDIUM THEORY AND ME:
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There's a joke that, according to its sources, has been around so long that no one can remember its origins. It goes like this:

Why is medium theory never taught?

Because it's rarely well done.

This presentation will explore that "well done" part. Medium theory is something I have pieced together through cracks of reference in my graduate education, and something I tried teaching for a full month in my "Media and the Public" class at Calvin College during the Fall semester of 2000. Students majoring in education, to my surprise, had the most vehement reactions. What follows, then, is a brief summary of the material itself (with my biases, of course – a characteristic medium theory obviously predicts), a report on my month-long experiment, and my resulting conclusions about medium theory's relationship to college instruction that addresses the use of new communication technologies – especially in the educational setting. Finally, I'll offer recommendations regarding ways this important subject matter could be recovered – and expanded upon – in today's communication and education classrooms.

What is medium theory?

The clearest proponent of medium theory today is Joshua Meyrowitz (1985, 1994, 1996). Meyrowitz recently sat on a panel at the International Communication Association's (ICA) 2000 conference debating potentially canonical texts for the discipline; his *No Sense of Place* was one of 12 works nominated. Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* and Harold Adams Innis's *Empire and Communications* were two of the remaining 11 nominees, although hardly anyone reads McLuhan despite frequent invocations (Meyrowitz 1996:76-78), and Innis's *Empire and Communications* is out of print. A

full quarter of these supposedly "canonical texts" were about medium theory and yet a sure-footed, agreed-upon definition of the subject matter is hard to find.

The best introduction, perhaps, is Meyrowitz's chapter titled "Medium Theory" in Crowley and Mitchell's *Communication Theory Today* (1994). Meyrowitz opens by saying questions of media content "are all very significant concerns, but content issues do not exhaust the universe of questions that could, and should, be asked about the media" (50). Contrary to some of the most popular perceptions of "technological determinism," to which medium theory is often linked, medium theorists do not argue that medium, or the form the content is communicated within, is the prime mover of all effects. Rather, they are arguing that it simply be taken more seriously than it usually is.

Below are two paragraphs from the *Communication Theory Today* text, which are very similar to the material presented in the book chapter that this presentation most closely relates to: "Taking McLuhan and 'Medium Theory' Seriously: Technological Change and the Evolution of Education" (1996). A section in the seminal *No Sense of Place* (1985:16-23) appears to be closely related to Meyrowitz's graduate work and is therefore a more extensive – and perhaps defensive – literature review of related research. Below, though, is Meyrowitz's explanation of this line of inquiry for those who may be unfamiliar with it:

A handful of scholars – mostly from fields other than communications, sociology, and psychology – have tried to call attention to the potential influences of communication technologies in addition to and apart from the content they convey. I use the singular "medium theory" to describe this research tradition in order to differentiate it from most other "media theory." Medium theory focuses on the particular characteristics of each individual medium or of each particular type of media. Broadly speaking, medium theorists ask: What are the relatively fixed features of each means of communicating and how do these features make the medium physically, psychologically and socially different from other media and from face-to-face interaction?

Medium theory examines such variables as the senses that are required to attend to the medium, whether the communication is bi-directional or uni-directional, how quickly messages can be disseminated, whether learning how to encode and decode in the medium is difficult or simple, how many people can attend to the same message at the same moment, and so forth. Medium theorists argue that such variables influence the medium's use and its social, political and psychological impact. (50)

It is difficult not to notice how such questions would help educators analyze incarnations of technology as well as the enduring influence of books and interpersonal mentoring and apprenticeship. Yet many new technologies receive "this has never happened before" rhetoric in the popular press and even

academic circles, and while each new technology's impact is surely unique (which these "medium-theory" questions imply), each technology also follows certain patterns of assimilation that can be compared to similar paths of previous technologies with interesting results.

Meyrowitz calls himself a "second-generation" medium theorist, citing McLuhan and Innis as the "best-known and most controversial" first-generation theorists (51). (See also Appendix A for a visual representation of Meyrowitz's extensive medium theory bibliography.) Indeed, Innis's and McLuhan's work made the ICA's conversation-generating hypothetical canon. Innis "rewrites human history as the history of communication technologies" says Meyrowitz, and McLuhan extends or builds upon aspects of his mentor's work, adding the notion of "sensory balance" (1994:52 and 1996:81). In addition, McLuhan

analyzes each medium as an extension of one or more of the human senses, limbs, or process. McLuhan suggests that the use of different technologies affects the organization of the human senses and the structure of the culture. He divides history into three major periods: oral, writing/printing, and electronic. Each period, according to McLuhan, is characterized by its own interplay of the senses and therefore by its own forms of thinking and communicating. (1994:52 and 1996:81)

In his summaries of medium theory, Meyrowitz also pays homage to Walter Ong, a contemporary and student of McLuhan (Farrell and Soukup 1992), whose work on the transition from orality to literacy provides especially rich insights about the transmission of religious beliefs over time. In the same vein – but not as prolific – as Ong are J.C. Carothers, Eric Havelock, Jack Goody and Ian Watt, and A.R. Luria. The subsequent shift from script to print has been tackled by Elizabeth Eisenstein and H.L. Chaytor, and the shift to an electronic culture by Ong, Edmund Carpenter, Tony Schwartz and Daniel Boorstin. Brief descriptions of these writers' key works appears in Appendix A.

As a "second-generation theorist," Meyrowitz sees himself as correcting "one dimension that is missing from first-generation medium theory . . . [a] detailed attempt to link this theoretical perspective with analyses of everyday social interaction" (1994:58). Meyrowitz's work offers this tangible contribution; his *No Sense of Place* (1985), for example, addresses the changes in group identity, socialization and hierarchy wrought by electronic media – defined as "television, radio, telegraph, telephone, tape recorder[s], and computer[s]" (69). These media have, in essence removed the "walls" of unmediated space that used to keep the social roles of male/female, child/adult, and authority/subordinate more distinct and separated from each other. What becomes problematic with medium theory – often at the

point of sincere attempts to operationalize it – is the flip-flopping of its various incarnations. For example, whereas Meyrowitz, often crediting McLuhan for the genesis of his ideas, illustrates the breaking-down of social distinctions, streams of McLuhan's work emphasize the unifying or "retribalizing" effects of electronic culture – a thread most recently picked up by Barber's *Jihad vs. McWorld* (1995), Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* (1996), and Beyer's *Religion and Globalization* (1994). While medium theory remains an intriguing idea – especially as academics and social observers in general try to assess the impact of the computer and assorted, evolving digital technologies – using this idea to make respectable academic "probes," as McLuahn would say, is still an exercise struggling with "no sense of place."

How is medium theory currently introduced to students?

Perhaps my haphazard experience with medium theory will mirror that of others:

I first heard of "medium theory" through its use as a parenthetical element to what appeared to be the more academically approved heading of "technological determinism." Meyrowitz's *No Sense of Place* was one week's worth of reading for a Ph.D.-level theoretical survey course at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Harold Adams Innis was mentioned in the corresponding class discussion, and I vaguely remembered his link with a person named McLuhan. This realization, in turn, reminded me that I had read (or should I say tried to read) McLuhan's *Understanding Media* during my master's level work. This burrowing back into my memory recalled the experience of Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, but I quickly observed – through those clues of derision and contempt one learns to pick up from Ph.D. advisors – that no one claimed to get anything worth thinking about from either Postman or McLuhan.¹ A few weeks after this, an unfortunate prospective graduate student proudly told of being in Postman's program in New York, and we never saw her again.

Innis, however, remained unscathed at Northwestern, even somewhat admired, and the brief dip into his work during that theoretical survey course was more incisive than anything I'd heard before. He was placed in league with Marx and Freud as a "grand theorist" – someone whose ideas, if even remotely

¹ Postman is named a medium theorist only in Meyrowitz's more liberal collection (1996), but his focus on television seems to be useful way to introduce the idea of isolated yet wide-ranging, medium-specific effects to students.

on track, would provide one of those magical keys to the universe of understanding. Unfortunately, all three couldn't be right (by nature of the definition of "grand theorist,"), but I decided right then that communication as an axis of all knowledge was the most palatable and attractive option of the three. Wanting to thus simplify my graduate level work (so many theories coming from so many directions . . .), I applied for an independent study of Innis, but was turned down. Undeterred, I tucked some research notes into my files – the titles of the dozen or so dissertations I could find on Innis – and plotted a re-attempt at this line of research for some time in the future. (Interestingly enough, as I re-checked Dissertation Abstracts to verify my previous count for this paper, I was surprised to find that although two dissertations on Innis had been published in each decade following his death (1960s, 1970s, 1980s), ten were published in the 1990s alone.) I also tracked down Elizabeth Eisenstein's *Printing Press as an Agent of Change* since I had heard her name linked with the assertion that "good communications history" had been one of the few respectable fruits to be born from this intellectual lineage. Though I have since realized that Eisenstein herself never makes the claim for which she's often credited – the idea that the printing press in some way caused the Protestant Reformation – it's clear that communications professors have eagerly co-opted her as an elegant example illustrating one of their still-difficult-to-prove-let-alone-test-or-investigate theories.

Despite these hurdles, I still find the concept of medium theory amazingly intriguing: that a focus on major shifts in dominant communications technologies – almost an interpretive communications history approach – can help students learn to ask better questions about the communication changes proliferating in culture today. My dissertation research is addressing one aspect of this question – the relationship between communication technologies and shifts in the content, structure and use of religion – but I still have a long way to go toward finding research methods that provide the right amount of rigor when testing or even exploring these concepts. One avenue of scholarly work in this direction could involve the task of simply becoming more familiar with the literature and source material on medium theory itself, and this is what I'm doing. In addition, since education and communication majors comprise over 20 percent of all Calvin students (www.calvin.edu/admin/enrollment/day10/index.htm), a class of these students seemed ripe for what medium theory had to offer. Despite warnings that Calvin students hated Innis (introduced to them in Czitrom's *Media and the American Mind* in previous classes), I plunged ahead.

The experiment

As an introduction to my pedagogical experiment – teaching medium theory when only a handful of my colleagues had ever heard of it or if they had, didn't think it worthy of extended thought – I asked the following question: What did I hope to accomplish by teaching medium theory? My primary reason was that it was theoretically fascinating (if not testable): it would leave students with a coherent stream of thought, however unscientific, to chew on. My second reason for doing so was that it would lay a somewhat historical foundation for the inevitable discussions and classroom drift toward contemporary media and its hot-button issues (children and advertising, movies and violence, magazines and eating disorders, and so on). I wanted students to realize that while some media questions were truly novel and unique to our times – the eating disorders dilemma, for example – others had seen many variations on the same theme (similar utopian rhetoric surrounding the advent of the telegraph, telephone and computer, for example). My third reason for teaching medium theory was that I wanted to get a better handle on the material myself.

Which class might be a fit? In the summer of 2000, I had thrown some Postman chapters, a few McLuhan and Innis excerpts, and a brief look at Ong into the reading list for a small class titled "Media and the Public"; the students responded positively to Ong and Innis (one even did a subsequent independent study on Innis), though Postman seemed to need a bit more in-class discussion. (He's good for that.) So Media and the Public (a Fall semester class) it was – a class described in paraphrase as "essentially a media history course" by a veteran who had taught many sections.

I was a little nervous about showing any loyalty to Postman; at the interview for my current position I had been asked whether or not I thought he refuted his own argument in the last eight pages of the *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (at the time, I couldn't remember what was on these eight pages). Even so, in other "Introduction to Mass Media" classes, I had found Postman to be one of the best conversation-starters around. I have taught at several small religious colleges – many of which focus on producing high-quality teachers, which is a highly valued vocation in these circles – and these education-minded students were sometimes the most articulate in their evaluation of Postman's argument (which is essentially that the medium of television cannot communicate serious material, namely politics, religion and education). In

addition, though Postman takes hits from other academics for his lack of scientific research, I have found his material useful for introducing Plato's thoughts on "medium" (Postman references the *Phaedrus* when he reminds us that writing was initially controversial (p. 13) – see also Horsfield 1999), and for legitimizing a look at source material from McLuhan (who is referenced throughout the book), Ong, and Eisenstein (both in chapter 4, "The Typographic Mind"). As a result of these textual connections, the "Media and the Public" students at Calvin College last fall read an excerpt from Plato's *Phaedrus*, an excerpt from Ong's *Presence of the Word*, an excerpt from *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, and the 1969 *Playboy* interview with Marshall McLuhan. Finally, as introduction to Innis, students read Czitrom's chapter "Metahistory, Mythology, and the Media: The American Thought of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan." Other teaching emphases within this month-long look at medium theory included:

- A look at the different "mediums" used to propagate the values of the student's institution – from a required interdisciplinary religion course called "Christian Perspectives on Learning" to the student newspaper, alumni magazine, college website and historical monuments. Which did they take seriously? Which were a "joke"? Which actually communicated values of the institution to them in a way that solidified their role as a part of this community?
- A visit to the college's trademark "Printing in the Reformation" exhibit (the best American collection of Reformer John Calvin's works are, understandably, at Calvin College) as well as an icon art exhibit that was on campus at the time. The point of these field trips, read in conjunction with Plato, Ong and Eisenstein, was to demonstrate the controversies and "growing pains" during major media transitions in the past. The Iconoclastic Controversies, in particular, are increasingly being revisited not only for the fact of their resurgence during the transition to print during the Reformation but also for their painstakingly thoughtful rhetoric about the power of visual images.²
- A not-so-successful comparison of President Clinton as he appeared in various media: pointed cinematic absence (*Wag the Dog*) cinematic depiction (*Primary Colors*) and raw,

² See David Freedberg's *The Power of Images* (1989) and Moshe Barasch's *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (1992) for works that relate well to material on medium theory.

unspun audio (an interview he did at Willow Creek Community Church on August 10, 2000). The goal of this exercise was to attempt to illustrate Postman's argument that evolving media change our definitions of "truth" (p. 27) and "intelligence" (p. 25) – in general, our epistemology (chapter 2). The Calvin students, who admit to feeling a bit overwhelmed by the plethora of political communication in the world that surrounds them, agreed to a noticeably improved sense of empowerment when Clinton appeared in a forum with which they were familiar: the church. The content of his message – his conversion to faith as a child and the ways he sees the work of churches and politics intersecting – was perhaps also related closely to this particular setting and format – a theme within medium theory that they experienced and understood.

The most invigorated discussions involving medium theory occurred when the topics of politics, religion and education were broached – Postman's TV-impaired categories. This group – in my opinion – brought even more nuanced observations to the discussion than Postman himself for the following reasons:

- While they tended to agree with Postman's assessment of televised religion, they – as a group – had had broader experience with a variety of religious formats that made Postman's attentiveness to traditional, face-to-face ritual seem a bit disingenuous if not elitist. They also agreed with my dissertation-inspired objection that all sorts of "religious consumers" are suddenly becoming "medium theory advocates" when they argue that the guitar's victory over the organ in the "worship wars" (conflicts over traditional vs. contemporary worship styles) is qualitatively good or bad.³
- Calvin's large education-major population makes it seem that everyone is either an education major, is dating one, or is rooming with one (if not all three). This particular group of students found great conflict between Postman – who advocates a primary emphasis on typographic

³ For a good introduction to this current medium-theory controversy, see the Michael Hamilton's "The Triumph of the Praise Songs" in the cover-story section of the July 12, 1999 *Christianity Today*.

culture – and McLuhan, who claims that most current educational approaches are “rear-view” and prison-like in comparison to the way most students now learn about their electronic world. Meyrowitz delivers a much-needed context to McLuhan’s ideas in his “Taking McLuhan and ‘Medium Theory’ Seriously,” even including the often-overlooked fact that McLuhan himself wrote a book on education *City as Classroom: Understanding Language and Media* (now out of print). “Unlike most other books on educational reform, the book is addressed to *students*,” says Meyrowitz (104).

The age or grade for specific exercises is never mentioned; teachers are almost invisible. Instead of focusing on ‘right answers,’ the book is designed to help students shape good questions and define research strategies to be worked on in small teams and then shared with the larger group. Students are encouraged to draw on traditional printed materials, but they are also encouraged to draw on nontraditional resources. (104)

As Meyrowitz will later note in his book chapter, many of these ideas are becoming a standard part of educational philosophy and practice today, although McLuhan – who advocated them several decades too early – is not often credited.

Whether they were staunch traditionalists (“books will never die!”) or open to learning in new ways using technology (an opinion advocated by the students with lower GPAs and those less comfortable with linear reading and writing anyway), the material from Postman and McLuhan fostered useful discussions among Calvin students about the nature and purpose of education – and the possibility that while one of these was a fixed concept (perhaps education’s “purpose,”) its “nature,” or modes of delivery, might be more fluid than they had originally thought.

- Medium theory also helped the Calvin students walk away from this section with distinct notions about how the concept of “public” has changed with new developments in technology. Whereas Postman leaves readers with the salient idea that “overweight presidents don’t make good TV,” the Clinton exercise (above) and material from Ong and especially Eisenstein (p. 94, where she also references Ong) helped students see that the exercise of politics is a function of the technologies people use to assemble themselves into governable groups.

When discussing their role in politics, the students admitted to feeling ineffectual, confused, and cynical. Nevertheless, they interacted vigorously with McLuhan's ideas about nationalism and racism – and the possibility that there might be more to these social dynamics than the stories they hear through the media and traditional schooling. His contradictory writing style was a bit too much for some students to stomach, yet others confessed to gleaning important political insights that they had never grasped or considered before. The task of distilling the best of McLuhan while filtering out his built-in stumblingblocks remains a pedagogical challenge, as Meyrowitz attests (1996).

To further persecute my students, I had them fill out a short survey at the end of this month-long experiment (see Appendix B). The purpose of the survey was to answer the following questions: 1) Was there some fine-tuning of my choice of medium-theory materials that could be guided by students' reactions to the selections outlined above? 2) Would the students find the material useful despite its inherent weaknesses . . . and might some even consider a media-related field (if they hadn't beforehand) as a result of studying it?

Both questions were answered.

In response to question #1, students had a chance to rate Innis, McLuhan, Eisenstein, Ong and Postman according to content, style (particularly appropriate given the emphases of medium theory), usefulness for understanding medium theory and overall preference (see Appendix B for exact wording of these questions). Using a rudimentary scale of values 1 to 5 (very unfavorable, unfavorable, no opinion/neutral, favorable, and very favorable), the means varied as follows:

CONTENT		STYLE		USEFULNESS		OVERALL RATING	
3.7	Postman	4.0	Postman	4.1	Postman	3.8	Postman
3.6	Eisenstein	3.4	Eisenstein	3.7	McLuhan	3.0	Eisenstein
3.5	Innis	3.1	Ong	3.6	Innis	3.0	Innis (tie)
3.3	Ong	2.6	Innis	3.4	Ong	2.65	Ong
2.7	McLuhan	2.5	McLuhan	3.3	Eisenstein	2.58	McLuhan

What is interesting is that McLuhan, even though he evoked the most ire of all the readings, still climbed to 2nd place when rated for "usefulness" in terms of understanding medium theory. The preference given Postman may be cause for concern – he is considered the last academically rich of the options above – but students clearly found his content and style more accessible.⁴ This finding can also become part of the pedagogical process: is it not "proof" of Postman's thesis that we prefer the most amusing versions of a particular topic? It is also interesting that Meyrowitz, in his *Communication Theory Today* chapter omits Postman (1994), but his chapter for the National Society for the Study of Education yearbook ("Taking McLuhan and 'Medium Theory' Seriously") includes him (1996). Meyrowitz's second list, in general broadens the list of "second generation theorists" to include writers (and educational video narrators) such as Susan Sontag, Alvin Toffler, and James Burke. (See the "C" list of Appendix A for further references.)

It appears that Meyrowitz may be working out an "archaeology" of the ways medium theory is currently being used and attributed – if not by an identifiable label. In the Society yearbook article in particular, for example, Meyrowitz argues, "Few have linked the education crisis and reform movement to McLuhan's theories. But if McLuhan's name is rarely heard these days in education circles – or elsewhere – time has been kinder to many of his ideas. By the 1990s, many of the general arguments that seemed far-fetched when McLuhan first offered them, now appear to be accepted as naturally as they were once rejected – though often without attribution to McLuhan (77). In fact, the award-winning, less-than-a-decade-old *Wired* magazine, with a circulation of 475,000 and climbing, has named McLuhan its "patron saint." (As of the writing of this article, 149 articles in *Wired* came up in a response to a search for his name.) The January 1996 story featured an interview "with" McLuhan, who would have been 85 at the time; the actual material was attributed to "a bot programmed with an eerie command of McLuhan's life and inimitable perspective" (www.wired.com:80/wired/archive/4.01/channeling.html).

To conclude some thoughts about McLuhan's mixed reviews in my medium-theory experiment, perhaps *Wired* is on the right track when simply "translating" McLuhan for a modern audience. (And perhaps *Wired* samples could be used in class as a more effective introduction to McLuhan.) This will be pondered for the next semester. Other findings from the Medium Theory/Media and the Public survey include:

⁴ Postman references Plato, Ong and Eisenstein in such a way that students are prompted to investigate original texts.

1. Basic Demographics:

Males:	34.6%	Seniors	30.8%
Females:	65.4%	Juniors	34.6%
		Sophomores	34.6%

2. During the month-long experiment, opinion about "medium theory" went from 2.96 (just below "no opinion") to 3.8 (close to "favorable").

3. Learning about medium theory did not deter anyone who was considering a media career away from entering the field, but it did encourage two who had not considered communications as a possible choice:

Was not considering a career in media/communications before and am not now:	34.6%
Was not considering a career in media/communications before and AM now:	7.7%
Was considering a career in media/communications and STILL AM:	46.2%
Question does not apply:	11.5%

Finally, the survey asked students to define "medium theory" and to link medium theory to a "Reformed perspective," which is a philosophical and pedagogical goal at Calvin College. The former ranged from a focus on "forms" rather than the content of media messages to "how the dominant medium of communication in society effects culture change" and "theory that society is becoming worse through television." The Reformed perspective is less relevant to this discussion, but it is disturbing that more students wrote that they did not share this perspective than attempted to integrate it with medium theory.

What can be learned from this medium-theory experiment and applied to the relationship between technology and pedagogy?

Three observations can be made about the relationship between medium theory and education that focuses on the use of new communication technologies in the college setting.

First, one of the most valuable "aha" moments that can spring from medium theory is the idea that epistemologies are not fixed processes. Medium theory helps students can learn about the rhetoric surrounding each new communication achievement – from writing (Plato's recording of the fear that writing might erase the skill of memorization) to Czitrom's chapter (1982) on "Lightning Lines" (universal communication) and furthermore to Bill Gates' *Business @ the Speed of Thought* (the salvific power of the computer). Extending media history to the major shifts focused upon by the medium theorists quickly proves to students the speed at which new forms of communication technology spawn emotional language referencing the salvation or demise of the societies that create and harness them. This kind of knowledge can help future communication educators distil historical facts from hype and to make informed connections between patterns in mass technological adjustment.

The concept of communication-affected epistemologies also relates to postmodern relativism, in which exposure to new channels of content (and new communication forms as well) has the potential to upset linear understandings of personal, group and other kinds of temporal-spatial histories. Medium theory can help a student pedagogically discover that even as postmodern thinking undoes some traditionally standard categories and canons, so can attention to Innis, McLuhan, Eisenstein and Ong "undo" postmodernism or at least place it into an unfolding (not necessarily linear) evolution of communications development.

Second, communications history that goes back further than the telegraph (birth of electronic communication), the printing press (arguably the birth of mass communication) or even writing can demonstrate to students that the period of "orality" contained characteristics that are both still with us and yet irrevocably transformed. Again, educators or professionals involved in making training decisions can be aided by the knowledge that "multimedia" options have always existed; in addition, Postman's targets of politics, religion and education are perhaps not only the best examples of social rituals that have been transformed by television, but they are also the institutions that have *always* changed and adapted to the technologies driving the people organized around them. The students at Calvin College, for example, were most fascinated by Eisenstein's observation that, prior to newspapers, most people received their news from the pulpit (1983: 93) and by McLuhan's proposal that educational models might be challenged by new forms of technology exercising a dominant role in our lives. Eisenstein especially helped students

make links between Innis's pessimism and McLuhan's optimism; she also argues that the church and schools, in particular, were not threatened by the new media of print but actually profited by combining its fruits with their staples of interpersonal communication and the resulting channels of social networks and learning (92). Students benefiting from some medium theory exposure might also be able to more effectively argue for the role of technology as supplement rather than replacement in some instances, using these models of precedence.

Finally, for the students at Calvin College – and this would pertain to any of the other educational institutions still working in or even directed by religious directives – medium theory is perhaps the only inroad currently allowing for some sort of philosophical connection point between a discipline and its inherited theology. Calvin College's "Reformed perspective," like other mainline religions, has its own idiosyncratic distinctives, one of which is the Achilles' heel-possibility that intellectual zeal can be the expression of one's faith and piety. Calvin's inclusion in articles such as the *Atlantic Monthly's* recent "Opening of the Evangelical Mind" cover story (October 2000) implies that even though it is a "religious college," its professors and administration are more open to perspectives such as evolution and a non-literal interpretation of the Bible than similar schools who have either "closed their evangelical mind" (to paraphrase the book title that is alluded to in the *Atlantic Monthly* article) or given up on the faith-intellect balancing act completely. Calvin's Reformed perspective actually dictates the challenge of going down both paths with equal fervor; for those sufficiently indoctrinated, it's called a "Kuyperian world view" after the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) who first articulated it.

The link between religious history and its communication controversies makes medium theory one of the richest lodes for multidisciplinary study at the faith-based educational institution – and arguably any institution with a sensitivity toward history, the societal channels through which values are transmitted, and the ways communities form around the two. Educational policy in general, it seems, hinges on institutional mastery of these very themes. Calvin's particular history goes back only as far as the Reformation, but those sharing a Catholic faith can trace the Church's wrestling with the controversies over pictures (icons), print (the Vulgate and more recent reforms of Vatican II) and now the market-driven megachurches and their accompanying profitable product lines. Analyses of these phenomena continue to spark questions in

secular and non-secular arenas alike, and medium theory can be a philosophical point of departure for many of the interests represented or otherwise affected.

I was initially drawn to the academic field of communications precisely because of its interdisciplinary methods – the diligent history, the respect for quantitative analyses, the flowering of qualitative textual approaches that are applied not only to books but increasingly to films, hypertext and now new interactive technologies. Communications is perhaps the only field with a philosophical orientation that must leave the door open to religion by default: Is it a ritual? The result of a behavioral stimulus? A Platonic form? Measurable content?

An article that set me on the path toward medium theory as well as a dissertation topic and ongoing ancillary projects is Hoover and Venturelli's "The Category of the 'Religious': The Blindspot of Contemporary Media Theory" (1996). In it, the authors argue that religious content has too often been excluded from scholarly debate when in fact a clearer understanding of its "meaning" and "forms" can shed light upon a number of sociological and political developments. Communication theory does seem uniquely poised to build bridges over the chasms caused by specializations in subdisciplines and the overall postmodern ethos – if only we'll let it and work hard to translate its insights into forms appropriate for our pedagogical milieu.

Do applications from this context-specific inquiry offer any general educational recommendations?

The point of the experiment outlined above was to test whether my still-forming opinions about medium theory could in any way be translated into useful pedagogical experiences for undergraduate students. My tentative conclusion is Yes; the topic did not appear to scare students away, and a few even showed an increased interest in media-related issues (assuming social desirability was not a factor in the completion of the anonymous surveys). Below are several specific "lessons learned" from the the Media and the Public -Medium Theory Month with special application to the communication theory and methodology issues raised by this AEJMC division:

- Exposing students to the thought of Marshall McLuhan is a must, although the best channel for that remains somewhat of a mystery. Meyrowitz's treatment of McLuhan's ideas in "Taking McLuhan Seriously," levels this assessment:

Will McLuhan and medium theory ever be taken seriously by educational theorists and practitioners? The explicit indications of that possibility remain scarce. Yet to the extent that progressive reformers of the last few decades have proposed dramatic changes in the physical and social and epistemic structure of schools . . . and the extent to which conservatives have realized that drastic measures would be needed . . . a more positive answer emerges: In the long run, educational theorists and practioners have taken McLuhan and 'medium theory' rather seriously after all – even if they have not been fully conscious of it. (106)

The extent to which pedagogical goals dictate reading McLuhan as a primary source will determine students' educational experience with him; perhaps Meyrowitz's work can lay the groundwork for a primer to McLuhan's work that is more in touch with the epistemological framework of today's college students. In the immediate future, however, a more playful introduction to McLuhan – perhaps a few articles from *Wired* demonstrating new applications of his ideas – and perhaps a better screening of the ideas that most anger students not living in the 1960s might lead to a "useful" McLuhan whose content, style and overall effectiveness are also appreciated.

- Finding the right ratios of exposure-to-theorists is a must. The question of "Postman or no Postman" remains somewhat of a conundrum: despite his entertaining style, he is not generally considered a "medium theorist" unless we, like Meyrowitz's 1996 book chapter, broaden our definition of what it means to systematically analyze the effects of a particular medium. Furthermore, in my experiment, it could be argued that the results clearly correlated with the extent to which students were allowed to get to know the style and argument of a particular author. For example, the students at Calvin read Postman's entire book, which certainly played a factor in their understanding and interacting with his argument (even if they disagreed with it). Innis, on the other hand – and though he received my unabashed label as a "favorite" – was not read in any primary form except for a photocopied page as a stylistic

example. Eisenstein and Ong were represented by complete chapters; their arguments, though somewhat self-contained in sections, were still, as a result, also somewhat truncated. Would it be possible to synthesize the most influential medium theorists' thoughts into an under-graduate- or even graduate-friendly primer? Or is there something inherently misleading about taking pivotal medium theories out of their original medium? The question of McLuhan's escalating popularity despite fewer and fewer people attending to his actual writings is somewhat troubling. There must be a place for introducing medium theory that captures its original contexts, however problematic those conditions may be.

- Finally, a multimedia perspective must be employed. How can students be expected to understand – however dimly – the predictable controversies that swirl around new media when pedagogy relies only on the one or two media in which they are most immersed (and hence oblivious to)? Though I did not do as seamless a job as I would have wished, the icon exhibit at Calvin College as well as the hands-on “Printing in the Reformation” seminar – both taught by specialists in those fields – seemed to give the idea of medium theory a bit more meat. In addition, the introductory exercise of examining the intended transmission of college values through a variety of channels – a campus “monument” describing the college’s founders, the college web page, and so on – perhaps would make a better conclusion to a unit on medium theory than introduction. Nevertheless, part of the instruction of medium theory seems, by definition, to include conscious forays into communication as it travels through a variety of media: Which values seem to require interpersonal explanation or modeling? What kind of information seems unimpaired or less altered when switched between different media forms? What kinds of learning require multiple “dips” or “takes” through a variety of communication channels? Communication and education students, in particular, surely must think about pedagogical intentionality from this perspective; otherwise the use of new technologies becomes a rote exercise

in merely following orders, escaping monotony or keeping up with the institutional Joneses.

Conclusion

In conclusion, putting my thoughts to this paper – a particular medium – has reinforced my intuition that finding a way to teach medium theory **well** is a worthwhile pedagogical endeavor. It is easy to err on the side of either blindly assimilating new technologies or on the side of critically dismissing their potentially complex benefits; college education – particularly in the fields of education and communication – must give students a better theoretical foundation as a way of helping them find this delicate intellectual-practical balance. Medium theory can be one of these vehicles. It draws on history and the solidity of well-researched questions while allowing for the possibility that our perspective regarding the importance of specific questions will change with time.

APPENDIX A: MEDIUM THEORY READING LIST

First-generation medium theorists:

Harold Adams Innis:

Bias of Communications. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1950.)

Empire and Communications. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1951.)

See also:

"Metahistory, Mythology, and the Media: The American Thought of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan" in Danial Czitrom's *Media and the American Mind* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

"Space, Time, and Communications: A Tribute to Harold Innis" in James Carey's *Communication as Culture* (Winchester, MA: Unwin Hyman, Ltd., 1989).

"Harold Adams Innis and Marshall McLuhan" by James Carey in *McLuhan Pro & Con* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1968).

Marshall McLuhan

Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man. ((New York: Vanguard Press, 1951).

And for critiques:

McLuhan: Hot & Cool. Gerald Stearn, ed. (New York: Dial Press, 1967).

"An End to McLuhanacy," *Educational Technology*, January 1982, pp. 39-45.

"Medium as 'Message' " by Kenneth Burke in *McLuhan Pro & Con* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1968).

And a good introduction:

Em Griffen's chapter on the "Technological Determinism of Marshall McLuhan" in *A First Look at Communication Theory*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991.

Second-generation (according to Meyrowitz) medium theorists:

The "A" list (more citations, more useful for ongoing discussions)

Walter Ong

Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958).

The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

Rhetoric Romance and Technology: Studies in the Interaction of Expression and Culture (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971).

Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982).

Elizabeth Eisenstein

The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early Modern Europe, vols 1 and 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

The "B" list:

J.C. Carothers – "Culture, Psychiatry, and the Written Word" (*Psychiatry* 22 (1959):307-320).

Eric Havelock – *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963).

Jack Goody – *Literacy in Traditional Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

Ian Watt – (with Goody): "The Consequences of Literacy," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1963): 304-345.

A.R. Luria – *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations*, translated by Martin Lopez-Morillas and Lynn Solotaroff and edited by Michael Cole (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).

H.L. Chaytor – *From Script to Print: An Introduction to Medieval Vernacular Literature* (reprint edition is London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1966).

Edmund Carpenter – *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me!* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973).

Tony Schwartz – *The Responsive Chord* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1974).

Daniel Boorstin – *The Americans: The Democratic Experience* (New York: Random House, 1973).

The "C" list: (found in Meyrowitz's 1996 chapter "Taking McLuhan and 'Medium Theory' Seriously")

Susan Sontag – *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1977).

Eric Havelock – "The Influence of the Window on Western Art and Vision," *The Structurist*, no. 17/18 (1977/1978): 4-10.

Edward Wachtel and Casey Man Kong Lum – "The Influence of Chinese Script on Painting and Poetry," *Et cetera* 48, no. 3 (Fall, 1991): 275-291.

Paul Levinson – *Mind at Large: Knowing in the Technological Age* (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1988).

Sherry Turkle – *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984).

Judith A. Perrolle – *Computers and Social Change: Information, Property, and Power* (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1987).

Susan Drucker – "The Televised Mediated Trial: Formal and Substantive Characteristics," *Communication Quarterly* 37, no. 4 (Fall, 1989): 305-318.

Shoshana Zuboff – *In the Age of the Smart Machine: The Future of Work and Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

M. Ethan Katsh – *The Electronic Media and the Transformation of Law* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

Gary Grumper and Susan Drucker – "From the Agora to the Electronic Shopping Mall," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 9, no. 2 (1992): 186-200.

Roderick Hart – *Seducing America: How Television Charms the Modern Voter* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Donna Flayhan – "Orality, Literacy, Class, and the Oppression of Women: The Case of Ancient Greece" (Paper presented at the Speech Communication Association annual conference, November 1993).

Alvin Toffler – *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970), *The Third Wave* (New York: William Morrow, 1980), *Powershift: Knowledge, Wealth, and Violence at the Edge of the 21st Century* (New York: Bantam Books, 1990).

James Burke – *Connections* (Boston: Little Brown & Co., 1978).

Neil Postman – *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (Penguin, 1985).

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- Huntington, Samuel. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
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- Meyrowitz, Joshua. *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- . "Medium Theory." Pp. 50-77 in *Communication Theory Today*, edited by D. Crowley and D. Mitchell. Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1994.
- . "Taking McLuhan and 'Medium Theory' Seriously: Technological Change and the Evolution of Education" in *Technology and the Future of Schooling: Ninety-fifth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part II*. Stephen T. Kerr and Kenneth J. Rehage, editors. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
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- Postman, Neil. *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. New York: Penguin Books, 1985.